

SERMON for the THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Matthew 10: 34-42

The Church's schedule of lessons for each Sunday is relentless in its discipline and the demands it makes on preachers and congregations alike. You might think that the Church would have made some allowance for the season. When summer calls for light fare, hamburgers on the grill and cold potato salad, the Lectionary hands us solid stuff, the meat and potatoes of Scripture. It calls for a lot of thought and a lot of prayer; but the dessert is worthy of the meal, if I can push that metaphor to its absurd limit.

It helps if we remind ourselves that Jesus did not have a stenographer following him around taking down his words in shorthand, nor did his disciples carry notebooks. We rely on the memories of those who heard him. In our more literate age we depend on the written word, and as a result our ability to memorize suffers. In Jesus' time, a teacher's effectiveness depended absolutely upon their being able to put their thoughts into powerful statements --sentences which would grasp the idea and make it unforgettable. Jesus was a master teacher. He was THE master teacher, and his words come down to us through the memories of his hearers with astonishing clarity and power.

More than being simply memorable, Jesus' teaching goes one step further. His words, his powerful sentences, his striking parables, challenge his hearers to do a lot of thinking for themselves. We can't simply file them away for repetition on the exam! The truth is always evolving in our own minds and hearts as we fit it into the changing circumstances of our own lives. Sometimes Jesus' statements are jarringly outrageous, and intentionally so. They stir the sluggish intellect. They make us think! That is certainly the case with the lesson which Matthew leaves us with today. My thoughts are evolving thoughts, they are the state of my mind at this moment, and that is exactly what Jesus asks of you.

"You must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Can this be Jesus speaking? Can this be the one whom we know as the Prince of Peace? How could he also say, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you."? "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." How many of the world's revolutionaries have used this single statement to justify violence? That, I can confidently say, is not the mind of Christ.

Along that line, at the most recent meeting of our Presbyterian Synod, we heard a first-hand report about some things that are happening right now. There is some crazy religion going on prompted by the year 2000 and the turn of the millenium. In Israel, authorities are highly anxious about radical Christian groups that may try to commit some violent act or acts in Jerusalem as a way of bringing about the Second Coming of Christ. We've already seen Israel's deportation of one such group, so the concern is real. One response is that Christian and Jewish clergy are studying together the scriptures which deal with the end of history, so that in partnership they may bring some biblical sanity to the whole business.

Jesus has something different in mind. He is facing his disciples -- including us -- with a radical decision. That decision is the "sword" which slices right to the heart of our values and commitments, and it can be a painful one. It means giving up some things to which we have

become deeply attached.. The same image appears in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews: "For the word of God is alive and active. It cuts more keenly than any two-edged sword, piercing as far as the place where life and spirit, joints and marrow divide." Jesus calls for a change, quite possibly a painful change, in how we think about our religion. It means re-examining every article of our belief. It means surrendering a safe and comfortable worship and embarking on a new and risky adventure of faith. It calls for a change in how we understand God and ourselves and how we relate to others. Jesus introduces a new understanding about God, about our own humanity, and about the relationship between them. And in bringing about a new understanding of God, of our own humanity and of the relationship between them, Jesus places himself at the very center, at the pivotal point in the relationship between God and ourselves.

Any radical questioning of values, any basic change in the direction of life, is likely to create trouble, and Jesus is certainly aware of that. Commitment carries a price, decision involves risk. "I have come to set a son against his father, a daughter against her mother, a son's wife against her mother-in-law." Notice that the images are all of the family, the most intimate of relationships -- don't even mention the wider community.

Matthew, may have had a more specific issue in mind. Matthew identifies more closely with the Jewish community than the other Gospel writers. His images tend to be drawn from the Jewish tradition. The Gospel divided that community and the divisions were often bitter ones. They literally set sons against fathers and mothers against daughters. To acknowledge Jesus as the Christ and the complete revelation of God flew in the face of much that was precious in their religious belief and practice. To their credit, religion was important in that community. It was central to their common life. To say that a decision for Christ would divide families was an entirely realistic prediction.

It is against this background that Jesus comes to his bottom line, the real message. It helps to remember that Jesus was about to send his disciples into uncomfortable situations where their very presence could, and probably would, create discord. To those disciples who were about to go into the middle of that turmoil, Jesus says, "To receive you is to receive me, and to receive me is to receive the one who sent me." After his sharp words, his alarming words, Jesus becomes the healer, the comforter, the one who reassures. His message is the one he always brings into the midst of our divisions. His commission is the commission he gives to all his followers who go in the midst of turmoil -- and who doesn't in this day and age? "To accept you is to accept me, and to accept me is to accept the one who sent me."

Jesus is re-defining our ideas of God, of our own humanity, and the relationships between them. And he sets himself at the pivotal point. The God who created the immensity of space and time is beyond any human ability to understand. It is Jesus Christ who shows us God in terms which we can understand. The universe reveals God's power and beauty and mystery. It is Christ who brings him into human dimension and intimacy and gives him meaning for our own human condition. "Whoever receives me," says Jesus, receives the one who sent me." It is with Jesus that God enters our lives and gives them meaning. It is with him that our relationships, our responsibilities, our human love take on a significance that is eternal.

If there is one thing human beings need more than anything else it is to know that our lives have meaning and that our death has meaning. We are not simply the creatures of our genetic make-

up. Our lives are more significant than the playing out of nature's inevitable program. Our relationships are more than the chance responses to our surroundings. We belong to God, and that makes all the difference.

It takes a lot of thought, and I am still thinking about what this all means. I don't know where it leaves you. If it means little or if it's too tough to chew, Jesus doesn't forget you. In teaching his own disciples he said, "Whoever receives a prophet as prophet will be given a prophet's reward." In other words, if the ordinary exercises of religion are as far as you want to go, that is a beginning. But there is more.

Again he says, "If you receive a good person because he is a good person, that human goodness is a beginning. "If anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water because of me, it will not go unrewarded." Simple human kindness is a beginning." But there is more.

To enter fully into the life and death of Jesus, taking up his cross and walking in his footsteps, even to the point of suffering the sword, the sword of hard decision, even the sword of separation from much that we hold precious, is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the "Cost of Discipleship." Its reward is to inherit life in all of its transcendent meaning, and to discover riches upon riches.

Charles B. House
Westminster Presbyterian Church
West Fargo, North Dakota
June 27, 1999